

The Camp Family of High Wych

Eric Willison

This is an article by Eric Willison, the great grandson of William Camp, who was a fruit grower and exhibitor for the Rivers Nursery in Sawbridgeworth.



William Camp 1847-1928.



198 Knight Street, Sawbridgeworth.

William Camp was born in 1847. He was the son of a shoemaker, George Camp, who was born in 1815. George Camp lived in Knight Street, Sawbridgeworth in the timbered shop opposite where the Peking Palace restaurant is now. His father Edward Camp, who was born in 1783, was also a shoemaker, and lived in Station Road. Records exist of his 7th great grandfather, Edward Camp, who married Ann Bride in Sawbridgeworth in 1711.

William Camp started work with the famous nurseries in Sawbridgeworth, under Mr Thomas Rivers. After seven years, he moved to a position in Chelsea, as clerk for the famous nurseries of Messrs J Veitch & Sons. He stayed there for a period of two years, until, at the age of 24, he was persuaded to return to Rivers as chief clerk. After 10 years he again returned to Veitch, where he learnt the art of exhibiting fruit trees in pots. He was aware of the great success that followed such an activity. Given the intense rivalry amongst the top nurseries in the land, such career moves were rather unusual.

Here's a story from William's second stint at Veitch's. Veitch, based as they were in Chelsea, were incredibly proud of their royal connections. One day a visit was announced from the Princess of Wales and the Crown Princess of Prussia. As part of the preparations, to clear the decks, as it were, William was asked to deal with two ladies who were wandering about. He

duly escorted them around the grounds, only to be told later that these were in fact the royals. Contrary to protocol the two princesses had wandered in unescorted!

William's second period in the employ of Veitch's eventually lasted for five years, after which he was invited to once again return to Rivers as manager, where he stayed until his retirement.



Silver Cup Award. Rivers 1915 .



William Camp at Bonks Hill House.

In 1870, William married Elizabeth Peake. The couple had seven children, four daughters and three sons. Initially, the family lived at Wiseman's Gardens, then in Chelsea. Finally, William had his own house built: 'Newports' on High Wych Road where he settled for the rest of his life. William's sons all followed his interest in fruit growing, eventually taking their skills to Denmark, Australia, Tasmania and California.

By all accounts, William did well for himself, and was well respected. This can perhaps be illustrated by the fact that, in 1890, he was jury foreman in an enquiry into an unexplained drowning. The enquiry took place in the Hand and Crown public house. The Camp family were also all very musically talented: George played the violin, and Edwin the double bass



George Camp playing the violin.

On 29^h January 1915, Elizabeth Camp died. Nearly two years later, on 27 December 1916, William married Bertha Nellie Slack, who had been a governess to the Gilbey family of Mark Hall. Yes, those of the Gin distillery! Nellie's Slack's sister, Annie, was married to Herbert Mace,

an authority on beekeeping and a friend of William. In 1926, he retired from Rivers, and on 13 February 1928, aged 81, he passed away.



Newports, where William Camp lived.

The Camp family around 1910.

William's son, Edwin Camp, was born in 1876. He followed in his father's footsteps, became a nurseryman and worked at Rivers, but he was also a distinguished bee keeper. He won many prizes. Below you can find a photograph taken of him after winning three 1sts, two 2nds and three 3rds at the Sawbridgeworth Show. He won prizes on many other shows as well. Like his father, he was Church Warden for St James Church High Wych.

Already 38 at the outbreak of World War One he would not have been called up. Nevertheless he did his bit through training women and boys to do agricultural work. After 4yrs of service as volunteer in the 5th Herts Reserve, he received the Kings note of thanks for his work. A patriotic man, he bought himself a uniform at the beginning of the war, and an overcoat as well. In 1919 he was proud enough to have himself photographed in uniform next to his prize winning items. In the second world war Edwin was there to train the land army girls then working at Rivers Nursery.



Right to left: Edwin Camp at Rivers Nursery, Edwin's prizes at the Sawbridgeworth show. Edwin Camp in World War 1 military uniform.

Edwin Camp, foreman at Rivers, was highly regarded by his colleagues there. One of these was Josh Brace, the orchard house foreman and Sawbridgeworth poet. In 1904, drawing on his experiences at Rivers, Josh wrote an acclaimed book on *Growing Fruit Trees in Pots*. In preceding years, nearly all the fruit trees out-of-doors had been killed by severe spring frosts. It was also Josh Bace's task to ring the famous Rivers bell to announce the beginning and the end of the work.

In 1904, Edwin married Sophie Patience Tarrant from Rendcomb in Gloucestershire. The couple had four daughters, Patience, Elizabeth, Carrie and Frances, plus two sons, Harold and William. For most of their married life they lived at 'Corinium', a house which Edwin's father William had built for them.

Edwin Camp also had an orchard of his own in High Wych, which is now the 'Dovedale' estate. It contained many of his favourite fruit trees, Early Rivers Plum, Victoria Plum, Conference Pear, Merryweather Damson, and many others.



The 'Camp Choir' of St. James's Church.

Rivers Nursery workers.

Apart from gardening, there was another tradition that Edwin's family continued: music making. As can be seen in the above picture, taken in 1924, three Camp generations sang in the choir at St. James's Church in High Wych. Edwin played double bass, Patience the organ, and Frances, my mother, born in 1914, the piano.



Bertha Camp.

Edwin and Sophie Camp with their children.

Frances Camp.

Harold, Edwin and Sophie's oldest child, emigrated to New Zealand at a very early age. He went out by boat with a friend on an assisted passage. Stories reached the family of how he toiled to clear the land for pasture by taking away the roots and stumps of the enormous Kauri trees that cover North Island, where he had settled. Harold became a successful dairy farmer, served in the New Zealand Army, but did not come over to Europe.

Patience, the oldest daughter, went to Cumbria, where she first worked for the Post Office, then, together with husband John Longhorne, they became proprietors of a shop on Kendal High Street.

Elisabeth became a teacher in Gloucestershire. Sadly, she died from peritonitis in her first year there. Carrie moved to London and married Eric Palmer.



Left to right: Harold Camp on his farm in NZ. John and Patience Longhorne in their shop. Harold Camp in the New Zealand Army.

William Camp, Edwin's second son, followed in his father's footsteps. He was born in 1911 and was my uncle. William was also a nurseryman, a clerk at Rivers Nursery, an amateur bee keeper and, latterly, the sub postmaster at High Wych. It was William who told me most of the early family history referred to here. The story of William's activities at the village stores has of course been told already elsewhere.

At the age of eight, I often accompanied my uncle William at the weekend to check the coke boilers for the greenhouses. I can remember the wonderful smell of a humid greenhouse, the vine and peach house, the smell of ripe peaches. I was allowed to gather those that had fallen. The aroma was unforgettable, and the peach fruit flavour and texture, exotic. William told me the grape vine was planted outside the house and trained inside. When a horse died, it would be buried against the roots to give it the nutrients it required over many years.

The greenhouse used to have a submerged tank, which caught water from the roof. This was always at the correct temperature for watering. Lots of frogs and creepy crawlies lived in it, which I found fascinating. The nurserymen could tell if a pot was dry by tapping the side with a stick as they walked by. Much better dry than over watered!



William Camp.



William and Mary Camp on their wedding day in 1944.

William and Mary Camp married in 1944 and had a bungalow built on the site of Edwin's old orchard. They named their house 'Dovedale', after their honeymoon venue. Next to Dovedale, their shop was then built. In the garden stood his many beehives. I often came to visit and remember on occasions being chased by a rogue swarm that had not settled in. One would leave a new swarm to settle in a hive for a few days, then gingerly take the top off and remove the cushions to have a look. If all was well you could gently take out the cushions and, with the aid of a little smoke, move the bees down. Some swarms did not take kindly to this, and would get upset. You could tell from the sound they made whether it was time to beat a hasty retreat. I had an ill-fitting hat and veil and no gloves and was stung more times than I can remember.

Frances Camp became Frances Willison upon her marriage to Ronald Willison in 1938. As mentioned before she was an accomplished pianist. On her 21st birthday, she was presented with a fine piano, which she played all her life. The instrument ended up being gifted to St James Church. Frances served an apprenticeship with Miss Neil's hairdressing shop, located on Bell Street in Sawbridgeworth. In later life, she became an independent hairdresser, cycling round the place from client to client. She was also very active on various committees and in the church.



Frances Willison, née Camp.

Great grandfather William Camp's second wife, Bertha, carried on living at Newports, until her death in 1937. Uncle William Camp passed away in 2002 after a long and fruitful life. Frances Willison, my mother, lived to 95 and passed away in 2009.

Thanks to Eric Willison for initiating this article. Janet and Theo van de Bilt did some editing. Other sources, were Sue Shepard's book, *Seeds of Fortune*, the *Gardener's Chronicle*. www.ancestry.co.uk and, as always, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies.